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Living on the Margins of Development: Domestic Women Workers

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Transnational, globalised economy is brought into the private home, not just in goods consumed there, but at its very core in the organizing and delivery of “reproductive” labour.

---Bridget Anderson.

Abstract: In India, workers in the informal sector are considered to be vulnerable and marginalised. Benefits of economic growth rarely reach to this segment of the society and they are also excluded from benefits of physical and social infrastructure expansion. This is particularly true for women. Women are constantly engaged in the household activities which are often unacknowledged and unquantified. This unparalleled contribution of women towards social reproduction of class has remained unpaid. Now that more and more women have started to take up employment outside the house, they are not able to perform household activities. The domestic helps have replaced them for performing household work and are being paid for it. The household work which was earlier unpaid has been quantified to some extent as payment is made to the domestic workers for such work. This paper discusses the unaccounted and invisible contribution of women domestic workers in our country. Women domestic workers are not recognized as workers and their work is undervalued. Home of the employer is the workplace for the domestic workers and this unique feature makes them vulnerable to abuses, exploitation and acute working conditions. But, these workers themselves are left on the margins of the development matrix. Stuck between bad working conditions and expectations of subservient loyalty, the Indian domestic worker has to cope with the worst aspects of both feudalism and capitalism.

This has led to a slew of new challenges for social justice that needs urgent consideration of the law makers and social scientists, given our national objective of inclusive growth. There is a common reluctance, in India, to accept the home as a work place. This is the prime reason for the low priority attached to labour rights and welfare in the current policy paradigm. The official data is unreliable and grossly inadequate as domestic work is notoriously under enumerated. The paper concludes by emphasising that the regulation and formalization of the domestic employment relationship is in the interests of both workers and employers. The government needs to draw its attention to the urgent need of provision of skill development, written contracts, regulatory body and regular inspections for the domestic workers. With the basic elements of protection, the government can assure them a minimum standard of living, compatible with self-respect and dignity which is essential to social justice.

1. Introduction

A basic feature of Indian economic development so far has been exclusion- exclusion from the benefits of economic growth; exclusion from the impact of physical and social infrastructure expansion; exclusion from education and from income-generating opportunities. However, exclusion from benefits does not mean exclusion from the system as

such. The marginalised section, which is part of the system, bears the effects of exclusion just because they have been incorporated into market systems. In other words, in India, there has been a process of exclusion through incorporation. *Jayati Ghosh*, in her article, ‘*Women’s work in the India in the early 21st century*’, says that the reduction in the government expenditure, in order to achieve structural adjustment, have in effect meant a reduction in access to a range of public goods and services for ordinary citizens, which tend to affect women especially adversely as the additional burden typically falls on them. Cutbacks in per capita health expenditure and the increase in user charges for such services typically reduce the extent to which the poor especially use such facilities.

Many developing countries now seem to follow policies which distort capital and labour market to favour urban areas over rural areas. The neo liberal policy of development is more market oriented and hence focuses too much on the profit maximization. The significance of female labour in the extraction of absolute and relative surplus value needs to be understood in terms of the role of unpaid labour, the ways in which women workers have affected capitalist practices of the management of labour and in turn been affected by it and the part played by women in forming the reserve army of labour. Table 1 presents the basic statistics of female employment in India, from 2011 to 2016. As per the Annual Employment-Unemployment Survey 2015-16, Indian rank in female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) is 134 in 145 nations.

Table 1: Employment Statistics and Females (per 1000)

		2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2015-16
1	Labour Force Participation Rate	254	226	254	237
2	Work Population Rate	236	209	238	217
3	Unemployment Rate	69	72	77	87

Source: Various Annual Employment- Unemployment Surveys

Women workers in the informal economy consist of the most vulnerable working segments in our society. These women include domestic workers whose social and economic contributions to society are invisible to the public, to the law and to the policymakers of the country. This sector primarily comprises women domestic workers who are not even recognized as workers. Further, their work is undervalued. This is largely due to the gendered notion of housework. Value is not credited to women’s work in their homes. By extension, the paid work in other’s homes is also not given any value and is not regarded as work. The unique feature of the work place of domestic workers, which is the home of their employer, makes them vulnerable to abuses, exploitation and acute working conditions. Hence we can say that one of the main characteristics of this employment relationship is its *invisibility*.

Domestic work includes mental, manual and emotional aspects, including care work communities (**Anderson 2000**). In common parlance, the term is defined as a person who is engaged on a part-time or full-time basis in domestic service, in return for remuneration payable in cash or kind, for a fixed period. The terms of employment may be expressed or implied. The *unequal balance of power* between employer and worker, and the lack of a precise job description and the expectation on the part of the employer of *availability at all times* to obey orders are also important characteristic of domestic employment. Also, this is an area of work where the employer and the employee are mostly females.

In India, domestic workers are included under the category ‘personal social and community services’ (Category 9) under the National Industrial Classification (NIC)

followed by national data collection agencies. Within this Category 95, which is that of private households with employed persons, is usually taken as domestic workers.

The Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) defines “domestic workers” in Article 1:

(a) the term “domestic work” means work performed in or for a household or households;

(b) the term “domestic worker” means any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship;

(c) a person who performs domestic work only occasionally or sporadically and not on an occupational basis is not a domestic worker. (ILO, 2013)

A vast majority of women who work in informal sector, in particular domestic workers are not unionized. This leaves a tremendous potential for trade unions and supportive organizations to come up and fight for social justice in the context of entrenched inequalities that suppress low order occupations. This also requires making rule-setting and policy-making institutions more inclusive to include representatives of the working poor (Chen et al 2006). The share of informal employment in the unorganised sector (all India level) stands at 99.6 per cent in 2011-12 (refer table 2) which is nearly same to what it was in 2004-05. This indicates the weak inclination towards taking significant steps for streamlining the unorganised sector.

Table 2: Share of Formal-Informal Employment across Organized –Unorganized Sectors in 2011-12 and 2004-05 (in per cent)

	Organised		Unorganised		Total	
	2011-12	2004-05	2011-12	2004-05	2011-12	2004-05
Formal	45.4	52	0.4	0.3	8.1	7.3
Informal	54.6	48	99.6	99.7	91.9	92.7
Total	17.3	13	82.7	87	100	100

Source: Niti Aayog

Note : Population projected for year 2004-05 and 2011-12 using decadal population growth rate between Census 2001 and 2011. Figures in brackets pertain to 2004-05.

Employing domestic workers has become very common in the urban areas of many cities where a large number of women go out for jobs. The domestic workers save much of the time and energy for the working females of modern cities. On the other hand, domestic workers have proved to be a necessity for non-working women also. In urban areas, they commonly engage domestic workers to help them in carrying out their household chores, partly due to physical inability and partly due to lack of inclination to perform household chores. Employing domestic workers has now become a lifestyle statement as it is considered odd not to keep one and instead do all housework oneself. As per Bino Paul et al (2011), those who do not employ a domestic worker are viewed disparagingly. People view women who clean their own house rather oddly and assume that they cannot employ a worker due to financial problems. Everyone decides to have a domestic worker in order to get prestige from commanding someone else's work, not because they need a domestic worker to help them with the work they are incapable of doing. Also we can argue that the new middle classes have developed a life style which has increased the demand for domestic workers. The current discourse on maids has been identified as being between “feudal” and “modern” (Ray and Qayum 2009). The relationship is in reality largely, still governed by the discourse of dependency and loyalty rather than the work contract (Sharma 2016). The lingering feudalism benefits employers by bringing with it the possibility of demanding more than what was agreed on (Otso Harju, 2016).

The domestic work sector is an n-dimensional sector where too many issues are unresolved and together they pose a serious problem for the future development of our country. Due to non-availability or limited availability of the data, certain basic issues could not be addressed, like the relation between technology (ownership of mobile phone or availability of kitchen gadgets) and domestic workers; toilets for domestic workers. Against this background, this paper attempts to look at the role of domestic workers in terms of raising a class for modern India, substitution of unpaid household work and their exclusion from the plan of development by the policymakers. The invisibility of such a work is emphasised. In order to do so, an extensive literature review is conducted. Published work of various NGOs and of organisations like SEWA was utilised. The informal channel of female migration within India and cross border migration in search of employment needs to be checked as many such women migrants land up as domestic workers. Numerous studies are available which are based on the working conditions of the domestic workers and the role of placement agencies, hence this paper covers them only briefly.

2. Unpaid Work of a Woman and Domestic Workers

Women have been part of the working class since the beginning of capitalism, even when they have not been widely acknowledged as workers in their own right. In all societies, and particularly in developing countries, there exist some unpaid economic activities (such as cooking, cleaning and other housework, child care, care of the sick and the elderly) which have always been absolutely essential for the functioning of the system. Such activities are largely seen as the responsibility of the women. Women are constantly engaged in these activities which are often unacknowledged and this leads to an unpaid and unparallel contribution to social reproduction. A substantial amount of women's time is devoted to unpaid labour, often at the cost of leisure and rest. This pattern of unpaid work tends to exist even when women are engaged in outside work for an income, whether as wage workers or self-employed workers. Many social scientists take women's work participation rate as one of the proxy indicators of women's overall status in society and of gender empowerment.

The 'reproductive work' of women in households has been commodified by assigning some payment for that work. Such a work has two aspects: a) 'care' work addressing the physical and emotional needs of family members including children, sick and the elderly, etc. and b) 'dirty' work maintenance of the household, including cooking, washing, cleaning, etc. But this commodification has not translated into the recognition of 'reproductive work' and the possibility of its 'valuation' (**Centre for Eductaion and Communication, 2010**).

Presently, home has become a place that produces leisure and privacy for one and produces capitalist exploitation, feudal servitude and symbolic alienation for the other. The employer of the domestic workers extracts the physical and emotional values produced by the worker, and consumes the leisure of abstaining from reproductive work. As per **Sangari (1993)**, this 'new' woman is celebrated for her self-styled ability to combine a career with 'traditional' womanhood. The ideal modern Indian woman was now an ambitious, career oriented, and successful executive by day, but a devoted and demure daughter/wife/mother by night. In day to day terms, the upper class family's very possibility of accumulating social capital through the empowered woman is based on the economic and emotional exploitation of the poorer woman.

India has one of the largest gender disparities in the world in terms of time spent on unpaid housework (**McKinsey Global Institute 2015**). For the middle class women unable

or unwilling to challenge the men around them, maids are the next best thing since “the double burden on middle class women is reduced without disturbing the traditional patriarchal system” (Neetha 2004). Lahiri Dutt and Sill (2014), Talukdar and Linders (2013) and Belliappa (2013) report that women feel unable to shake away the feelings of domestic responsibility even while employed outside.

Social norms, values and perceptions also operate to render most household-based activity "invisible". This invisibility gets directly transferred to data inadequacies; making officially generated data in most countries (and particularly in developing countries) very rough and imprecise indicators of the actual productive contribution of women. All this means that the data on the labour force participation of women are notoriously inaccurate (Jayati Ghosh).

3. Work Life of Domestic Workers

There are two distinct categories of domestic work; a) Live-out and b) Live-in. Live-out workers are further of two types: 1) those who work in one house for the whole day and go back to their homes in the evening and; 2) those who work in different houses during the day, performing one or more tasks in each household and go back home in the evening or night. Such workers come under part-time domestic work as they go back home at the end of the day. There is another form of part-time in the category of live-out workers i.e., in terms of piece-rate. It is generally applied to washing clothes and utensils. The wages for such work are calculated on the basis of family size. The placement agencies or domestic service providers are not homogenous entities. They differ drastically in almost all the states in the aspects such as size, nature of operations, objectives and the services offered to employers as well as workers. Most of the agencies rely on middlemen or agents. It is documented that each agency has up to 10-12 agents attached to them, who make visits to village areas each month or once in two months and look for possible families/individuals who can be persuaded to send their girls to work as domestic workers. (Neetha, N. 2009).

While the Indian Middle to upper classes are vague and internally fragmented, they constitute a common class through their use of maids (Ray and Qayum 2009). The “new middle class” is new merely in its outward appearance and lifestyle, and is built on “old” class privilege (Fernandes 2006). As per Harju (2016), to understand the importance given to the handling of maids, one needs to understand the class anxiety. In Bourdieusian thinking, the middle class is the class most dependent on the reproduction of social capital. In India too, the well off are dependent on “professional capital as a means of advancement” and “must put [their] children through a rigorous training and educational process” (Kapur 2014: 16) ‘Managing’ maids and making sure everything goes smoothly in the household is still their responsibility. For a number of employers it is less important how *well* a maid cleans than that she performs the symbolic act of cleaning (Harju, 2016).

The Domestic Workers Convention 2011 adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) sets minimum standards for domestic workers and specifies working conditions such as hours of work, overtime pay, salary increases, deductions, annual and sick leave social security and access to benefits, in totality “a decent working condition.” Many countries have pursued new legislative and policy reforms through the ratification process. However, not much progress has been made in India to regulate the sector. The primary reason given is the relationship between the location of work “private household” and the informal employment.

Many studies have reported that there are no standard norms that decide working conditions for domestic workers. There are no particular number of working hours specified for the domestic workers. They can work from 8 to 18 hours a day while live in domestic workers are on call 24 hours each day (**Sharma, 2003**). The live-in domestic workers surrender their personhood to their employers which makes them extremely vulnerable to acute physical and emotional exploitation through the slavery-like practices of the contemporary era. Domestic workers usually share their employers' houses as their place of residence, which is also their place of work, restricting mobility and any sense of privacy. As shown in **ILO (2010)**, India is yet to provide core entitlements for decent work like maternity benefit. Unfortunately, these workers, incurring the risk of working in indecent conditions, are enmeshed in a system with excess supply of workers; they tend to offer services to relatively well-off households, who are likely to have much better availability of rights and entitlements (**Bino Paul G D, Susanta Datta, Venkatesha Murthy R, 2011**)

Some domestic workers do not get any rest during the day while others may not be given proper food or living space. Life is much tougher and more harassing for women and girls where toilets are absent. As per the study conducted by **Mehrotra S.T. (2010)**, 70 percent households allowed their domestic workers to use a toilet in their house while 30 percent did not. Of the 70 percent who allowed the use of a toilet, 40 percent households had a separate toilet for domestic workers while in 60 percent households the domestic workers used a toilet that was part of the main household. Few domestic workers did share that they used the toilets without the permission or knowledge of the employers. But domestic workers working in large apartment complexes drew attention to the fact that the toilet that they had access to a common toilet used by guards and drivers as well. They were reluctant to use these toilets as they were also used by men and were generally dirty.

In Delhi, a domestic worker revealed that she ties her two children to a cot while she is working in the homes of others because there is no one to watch over them and nowhere to take them, and no other way to ensure that they remain safe when alone at home. The resolution of a work-life imbalance for some leads to serious work-life deficits for others, and an overall reinforcement of a gendered division of labour in society (**Centre for Education and Communication, 2010**).

Stuck between bad working conditions and expectations of subservient loyalty, the Indian domestic worker has to cope with “the worst aspects of both feudalism and capitalism” (**Menon 2012**). India is peculiar because “there is no necessary relationship between the employment of domestic servants and middleclass women’s labour force participation” (**Ray and Qayum 2009**). The amount of work, combined with a wide availability and cheap prices definitely play key roles in the prevalence of maids in middle class India, but domestic workers do more than just clean. The domestic worker is not a worker and cannot have recourse to labour laws or labour courts in case a dispute arises with the employer (**Sankaran, et al, 2009**). The outcome of such a position is the implicit exclusion of domestic workers from the National Minimum Wages Act, 1948. The denial of their basic labour rights to domestic workers has to be understood in a larger socio-political context. The gendered and class aspects of domestic work, combined with the general devaluation of care work, explain the State’s approach to the concerns and legislation on domestic workers (**Neetha, N. 2009**).

Apart from no protection under legislation and severe working conditions the domestic workers also face low wages. In fact, they are the lowest paid workers in India and are paid an amount which is even below the minimum wage of semi-skilled and unskilled workers (National Domestic Workers Movement). In 2008, the wages of women domestic workers were less than the national floor level minimum wage of 80 rupees per day, both in rural and urban areas (Ministry of Labour and Employment). The wages of urban, part time workers are first of all differentiated by the board division of work, such as cooking, cleaning, and babysitting, cleaning tasks, which are paid between 400-1000 rupees per month. As per **John, K. (2013)**, the wages of live-in workers range between 1000 to 4000 rupees per month (in 2008), depending on the worker's experience and the specific tasks to which they are assigned. Board, lodging, clothes, and other articles of daily use are provided.

The placement agencies mostly charge a registration from the employer, which ranges from Rs. 4500-10,000, for a contract of 11 months. It is also reported that a few agencies even take a repayable security deposit from the employer (**Neetha, N. 2009**). The agents adjust a considerable proportion of the domestic workers' salary of the initial months as brokerage expenses, transportation costs, etc. In most of the cases, the salary of domestic workers is directly collected by the placement agency. Agencies claim that they will send the money to the family of the live-in domestic workers. Though, the workers say that the whole amount never reaches to the family. The agencies often take no responsibility for the workers and are not bothered about their working conditions as well. Agencies have no extended commitment attached to the workers such as support during illness or provision of interim stay, when the employers are away for longer durations.

Domestic work is not only a most heinous nature of work, but also remains a devalued sector with precarious working conditions (**Francois, 2008**). Further, in this context, low wage scenario in domestic work segment is very well understood, owing to the reason that domestic work was traditionally considered to be an unpaid activity, mainly performed by female members of the family. This gender relations in the context of domestic work, as ILO defines "gendered" family responsibilities in private homes (**ILO, 2010**), offers a convincing argument for low wage offered in this labour segment. (**Bino Paul G D, et al, 2011**)

4. Indian Scenario

A significant part of the explanation for the paradoxical combination of increasing paid work, unpaid work, underpaid work and open unemployment of Indian women lies in the macroeconomic processes. There are also some clear failures of this growth process even from a long run perspective. An important failure is the worrying absence of structural change, in terms of the ability to shift the labour force out of low productivity activities, especially in agriculture, to higher productivity and better remunerated activities. Agriculture continues to account for more than half of the work force even though its share of GDP is now only around 15 per cent (**J. Ghosh**). As per **Neetha (2009)**, the agrarian crisis in rural areas and the loss of livelihoods have resulted in the sourcing of a regular supply of cheap workers, for whom this is the only promising option. The growth of the sector during this period has been explained in terms of the process of economic growth and modernisation. Growth and urbanisation are said to encourage the growth of the domestic service workforce, as they produce an affordable class of employers and a surplus of unskilled workers.

Domestic workers constitute one of the largest women sectors in India. In 2004-05, there were 30.5 million women domestic workers in urban India marking an increase by 22 percent

from 1999-2000 (**Chandrashekar and Ghosh 2007**). This increase in the number of domestic workers is linked to shift from agrarian – based economy to a manufacture and service based economy. It is also associated with the growth of the urban middle class, especially the increase in the number of women working outside their homes and the availability of cheap domestic labour. When we look at table 3, we observe the gendered pattern in the domestic work segment. Male domestic workers are 0.5% of total employment while the female domestic workers comprise 2.2% of the total employment.

Table 3: India: Employment by industry subcategories and sex, 2004/05 (NIC 2004)

Activities of households as employers of domestic staff	Both sexes	Females	Males
Housemaid / servant	2312200	2011300	300800
Cook	123400	89300	34200
Gardener	19300	4200	15100
Gatekeeper / chowkidar / watchman	135700	7000	128600
Governess / babysitter	87700	62800	24900
Others	1528400	780600	747800
TOTAL	4206700	2955200	1251400
Total estimated employment	408246900	135834000	272412900
Domestic workers as percentage of total employment	1	2.2	0.5

Source: ILO analysis of the micro-data of the 2004/05 Employment and Unemployment Survey (61st round), National Sample Survey Organisation

A significant population of women and children domestic workers tends to be concentrated in large cities of the country. In *Mumbai* city alone, an estimated 600,000 domestic workers exist, of whom 80,000 are on full time employment (**D. Lakshmi Rani & Mr. Manabendranath Roy, 2005**). Bangalore is reportedly a host to 500,000 domestic workers. They are mainly migrant women workers, 25 percent of whom are girls 10-16 years of age who dropped out of primary school and accompany their mothers to work and would soon end up being workers in their own right (**Rani & Roy, 2005**). *Ahmedabad* city has more than 50,000 domestic workers constituting mostly women (**SEWA, 2008**). On the other hand, 5,000 children mostly girls work as domestic in the *Bhubaneswar*, the large city of Orissa, India (**Press Trust of India, 2005**). It is generally held that the official figures are unreliable and grossly inadequate as domestic work is notoriously under enumerated (**John K, 2013**). As per **Neetha, N. (2009)**, broad estimates, there are over 800-1000 placement agencies in the capital city of Delhi itself. Although the term ‘placement agencies’ may suggest a somewhat organised and formal form of recruitment and placement of workers, in the context of domestic workers, it denotes a range of informal arrangements.

India is both a country of origin, transit and a destination for domestic workers. India receives domestic workers from the neighbouring countries of Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and there is estimated to be 90 million current local and migrant domestic workers in the country. Inside of India, underage domestic workers are an increasing problem, there are an estimated 12.6 million underage domestic workers, 86% of them are girls and 25% of them are below 14 years of age (**A Handbook on Domestic Worker Rights across Asia, 2010**). There are several reasons for the growing demand of domestic workers. First and foremost is the change in the structure of the Indian economy. Apart from that the increasing household annual income, double income families, nuclear families, middle class women taking up employment, changes in the lifestyles, women withdrawing from the unpaid

household chores, changes in the demographic profiles of the country etc. Over the last few years, studies on domestic work in India have noted the increase in the numbers of migrant female domestic workers in the cities. They have also observed that domestic work is highly informal in its organization and highlighted the vulnerabilities of domestic workers who belong to the poorer and uneducated sections of society. These studies also note that women from marginalized castes form a substantive group of domestic workers (**Kaur 2006**). For tribal people from the regions of Jharkhand, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, migration has long been a livelihood strategy. Generally, the tribal migration pattern is interpreted with stress on volunteerism as well as coercion. The industrial development alienates the tribals from their means of livelihood and reduces them to the status of bonded labourer which marginalizes them. This also affects the demography and ethnicity of tribal areas. The migration of tribal girls to other states in search of livelihood is probably the severest spill-over of this process of growth and displacement. At present thousands of tribal women are migrating to mega cities like Delhi, Calcutta and Bombay and end up taking domestic work because they lack skill and education. For millions of migrant women, domestic work is a natural extension due to gendered division of labour.

Scale migration of single women moving out in groups or individually to cities in search of livelihood is the distinct feature of tribal migration from states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bengal and Orissa, at present. ‘Pull’ factor for many is the glamour of city life which induces young girls and women to migrate. The Delhi metropolitan is their most preferred destination. In Mumbai and Calcutta the locals from the surrounding areas take up domestic work but the Delhi locals are generally well-to-do and have opportunity to take up other work so they leave the domestic work on the migrants. Another reason for high demand for domestic workers in Delhi is because of high concentration of business head offices, IT companies, banking firms which employ men and women in highly paid, skilled and professional work. The upkeep of these professionals, who work for long hours, is only possible because of the support of low paid workers. For sustaining the urban population of Delhi, the domestic workers need to be imported from impoverished tribal hinterland. In this process of migration, there has been a paradigm shift in the status of tribal women. Women are forced to migrate to survive and help their family. They are easily manipulated by simply providing travel expense and false hope and deception. The family voluntarily sends them, given the poverty and absence of economic opportunities in the tribal region. (**Ramanujam, R**).

What one can also observe in recent times is the Nepalisation of domestic work in Indian metro cities. The proportion of Nepali women in domestic work is increasing. India is a rapidly industrialising neighbour to Nepal and Nepalese provide more cheap labour than Indians. Though they make up a majority of domestic workers, the Indian urban poor, a big source for domestic labour, prefers to look for work in other sectors than domestic work. (**Centre for Education and Communication, 2010**).

As per the Statistical Abstract of Delhi, 2016, the residential institutions and work centres for women data (Table 4) is quite disappointing. Migrant women do not have enough residential centres for their shelter in Delhi or work centres for earning a livelihood. There is nearly no improvement in the numbers from the year 2008 to 2016. This clearly indicates the exclusion of women from the Indian developmental process.

Table 4: Women Welfare

Years	Residential institutions for women	Work centres for women (No. of
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	(No. of institutes/Services)	institutes/Services)
2008-09	4	25
2009-10	4	25
2010-11	6	21
2011-12	6	21
2012-13	11	18
2013-14	3	18
2014-15	5	18
2015-16	5	7

Source: Statistical Abstract of Delhi, 2016

After a struggle of few years, in Delhi, SEWA members could ensure that running water is accessible to the domestic workers in Sundernagri. In Raghbir Nagar, the members could not use the community toilet as it was rendered dysfunctional. After a lot of lobbying by SEWA members, the MLA of the area intervened and the MCD repaired the toilet and started maintaining it (**SEWA Delhi Report, 1999-2012**).

Few states in India have introduced minimum wages for domestic workers. Karnataka became the first state to fix a minimum living wage for domestic workers in 2004 so as to establish some kind of fairness in wages. It was fixed at Rs. 1600 per month for an eight-hour day of domestic work (**Hamid, 2006**). In Maharashtra, the State Labour Board issued guidelines regulating the services of domestic workers in 2000. The service rules included paid leave, travel allowance, fairer wages, etc. Similarly, in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, domestic workers are recognised as part of unorganised sector and can also form worker unions (**Sharma, 2003**). (**Dar & Rani**). Though these states introduced minimum wages, but the regular increment attached to inflation is not provided and the updation in the wages does not take place as per the new poverty line.

Ray and Qayum (2009) argue, maids help the employers “produce themselves as the class destined to lead India to modernity”, while the workers become “premodern and dependent”. To uplift this segment and to really include them in the economic development of our country, one need to focus on the *quality*, the *recognition* and the *remuneration* of domestic work, as well as the *conditions* facilitating it. Employment contracts should be the first thing to implement. While making employment contracts it is imperative that the following points are considered: a) The written contract drawn should imply that the employer needs to treat the domestic worker as a formal employee and hence should uphold the contract, b) The mode of payment to domestic workers need to change (i.e., from cash to check). This has already being proposed in the Delhi Private Placement Agency Regulation Bill. c) The placement agency needs to ensure that all domestic workers have access to a bank account and also knowledge of banking system. If the workers do not have an account or the operative knowledge of the same, then it has to be the duty of the agency to see that it is done d) Finally, a statutory body will be required which regularly ensures the upholding of such contracts.

The next area to develop is the skill development. This needs to find a firm ground in our national policies. Further, legislation is required which works for the recognition of the skills required in domestic work. This will offer a better future for domestic workers via promotion of basic literacy skills and vocational training. The Government of India is working on strategies to recognise the skills of domestic workers with pilot activities in Delhi on skills

mapping with a view towards certification. (Asha D'Souza 2010). The government at the same time should also introduce parallel measures, like training and awareness programs, social security measures that empower migrant domestic workers and give them the needed negotiating leverage in an otherwise unequal employment relationship. For employers to be fair with domestic workers in terms of payment the government may also give tax rebates on the wages being paid to the domestic workers. The business models of The Maids Company (located in Gurugram) have a great potential to remove the imperfections of the market for domestic labour. The company has programmes for adding or improving various skills required by the domestic worker to perform the job satisfactorily for an employer. The government should encourage setting up such business ventures by providing financial aid, or other appropriate incentives. Also, there needs to be a regulatory body which regularly checks the working conditions by the way of surprise inspections. It is also important that the role of education is properly told to the poor families and the communities which largely work as domestic workers so that they become more aware and can fight for their rights which are already in existence. The skill set and education together can raise the living standards as well as eliminate the exploitation of the domestic workers and this would be the start of the inclusion of an otherwise excluded segment of our society.

5. Conclusion

A question to be posed is why do, and how can, governments that speak the language of social justice and social welfare ignore the recommendations of bodies that they themselves have set up. The government also overlooks the legislative proposals that give workplace rights to their citizens. Further, the political clout of an expanding middle class has grown. Hence, the steps that do not appear in their interest are kept in abeyance.

In the literature on modern domestic service, the growth of domestic service has largely been attributed to the processes of economic development. Given the particulars of domestic work and employment, the current policy paradigm shows the reluctance to accept the home as a work place as low priority is attached to labour rights and welfare. The segment is mostly composed of women and children and they hardly figure in the statistical records and the laws of country which leads them to be the invisible workers. They usually come from lower caste, with very little education and are often unaware of their rights. The major challenge is to involve workers, unions, employers and the state to identify steps to address the diverse issues. The workers need to have an understanding of collective bargaining power which can bring about this change. There has to be a sense of solidarity among them to challenge ill treatment or unfair wages. We need to recognise the fact that domestic work is also a 'service', a care service which is multifaceted in nature, ranging from housecleaning services to taking care of children and elderly. Still domestic work is not accorded the value it ought to. There are many other care services that are professionalized, for example nursing in India. Earlier nursing was considered a menial occupation. But after the nursing service started getting professionalised, it raised both the bargaining power and respect of the nurses. Similar change can be expected in the domestic work sector if we do the same.

Ensuring basic rights for domestic workers also requires a significant change in the attitudes and behaviour of their employers. These employers constitute not just the rich elite groups in the country but also a growing number of middle class beneficiaries of the economic growth process. The regulation and formalization of the domestic employment relationship is in the interests of both workers and employers. Specifying the rights and duties of each party will remove many of the difficulties that employers sometimes face. Rules and laws that

recognize domestic workers as workers in the home, and that regulate their working conditions and pay; recognition of the work of the agents who mediate the worker-employer relationship, could have a fundamental impact on the conditions of work across the whole informal sector. We can conclude by saying that the development should aggregate a) equality of opportunity, b) entitlement to social minimum, c) accountability, and d) fair distribution of resources. These steps would further see a shift in the nature of social policy in India, which would impact the valuation of women's work and the gendered divisions in work, marriage, and the family. The government needs to draw its attention to the urgent need to provide domestic workers with the basic elements of protection which would assure them a minimum standard of living, compatible with the self-respect and dignity essential to social justice.

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